

December 23, 2016

Bradley D. Tilden
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Alaska Air Group, Inc.
19300 International Boulevard
Seattle, Washington 98188

Dear Mr. Tilden:

Last week, an American Airlines flight traveling from Dallas to Indianapolis was forced to make an emergency landing when an electronic cigarette in a passenger's carry-on luggage caught on fire mid-flight. Had it not been quickly contained, the fire could have caused catastrophe for all 137 passengers aboard. This troubling incident is not uncommon, and the increase in e-cigarette use means the likelihood of in-flight fires is only going to grow, creating a terrifying risk for all who rely on safe air travel – as well as disrupting the lives of everyone inconvenienced. In recognition of this severe and totally unnecessary risk, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) has banned e-cigarettes from checked luggage. As Americans take to the skies this week to visit friends and family for the holidays, I write to demand that you follow DOT's lead and ban e-cigarettes being taken into your aircrafts' cabins, whether in carry-on luggage or otherwise.

The use of e-cigarettes is reportedly rising, particularly among young people, creating a growing and unique safety threat to those in proximity to the devices. While other electronic products have lithium-ion batteries – like laptops and cell phones – e-cigarettes are manufactured differently and function differently. The U.S. Fire Administration noted in a 2014 report that e-cigarettes are “are different from other electronic consumer devices” as they have a unique cylindrical nature and are “more likely than other products with lithium-ion batteries to behave like ‘flaming rockets’ when a battery fails.” Moreover, there are no safety standards governing these devices.

The American Airlines episode is just one of several recent alarming incidents documented by the FAA involving e-cigarettes causing fires in or near aircraft cabins:

- In June 2016, an e-cigarette in a Spirit passenger's carry-on bag began smoking at the gate. The fire department was called to put out the fire.
- In June 2016, an e-cigarette in a Spirit passenger's carry-on bag began smoking mid-flight, requiring the fire to be put out by a flight crew member using a fire extinguisher.
- In March 2016, an e-cigarette in a Delta passenger's carry-on bag caught on fire during the boarding process before being extinguished by a flight attendant.
- In December 2015, an e-cigarette battery in a JetBlue passenger's carry-on bag experienced a “thermal runaway,” catching on fire at the gate before being extinguished.

- In September 2015, an e-cigarette battery in a Mesa Airlines passenger's carry-on bag ignited at the gate, causing smoke to travel through the cabin, requiring the fire department to come aboard and extinguish the burning bag.
- In June 2015, an e-cigarette in a Southwest passenger's pocket ignited in-flight, burning the passenger and causing the battery to "shoot out of the device."

Incidents like these should not be the new normal in air travel. Thankfully, the federal government has already taken some important steps to protect air passengers. In May 2016, DOT issued a rule banning these devices from checked luggage, deeming it necessary to address "the safety risks posed by battery-powered portable electronic smoking devices." That rule, however, does not go far enough. While it is prohibited to use or charge an e-cigarette in flight, DOT continues to allow their presence in the cabin, where they can spontaneously explode. DOT justifies this because "flight crew can quickly intervene in the case of overheating, short circuit, or fire." But an e-cigarette is just as dangerous in an overhead bin two feet above a passenger as it is in the luggage compartment two feet below. A fire may not be quickly identified and contained by passengers or flight crew members. The fire could happen on a red-eye flight, when passengers are asleep or when flight attendants are busy addressing other in-cabin needs. Moreover, an e-cigarette could ignite in a carry-on bag next to other permissible but still combustible materials, like paper, creating a conflagration that moves too quickly to contain.

I sought to ban e-cigarettes from aircraft cabins in the aviation bill Congress considered earlier this year. Unfortunately, that bill instead merely extended aviation programs for the short term instead of advancing new aviation safety measures. I will push again for a ban next year when Congress reconsiders the bill with an eye toward longer-term reforms. I will also continue to call on DOT to use its authority to effect this ban across the industry. In the meantime, you can assert your proactive commitment to safety – and potentially save lives – today.

There is precedent for such action. Last year, the country's three largest carriers – Delta Air Lines, United Airlines and American Airlines – decided on their own to ban hoverboards from *both* carry-on and checked baggage. Delta noted, "While occurrences are uncommon, these batteries can spontaneously overheat and pose a fire hazard risk." The same rationale applies to e-cigarettes, as we saw just last week and saw repeatedly in earlier incidents.

I appreciate your attention to this vital safety matter. After so many warnings and red flags, it is imperative for your industry to act to ensure these dangerous devices remain permanently grounded.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate